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CHARLES KINGSLEY AND LITERARY THEORY OF THE 1850S

By John C. Hawley

IN 1850 THOMAS CARLYLE advised Charles Kingsley to “pay no attention at all to the foolish clamour of reviewers, whether laudatory or condemnatory” (*LK* 1: 245).¹ Kingsley had just published his first two novels, *Alton Locke* and *Yeast*; he thanked Carlyle for the advice and assured him that he would welcome the “folios of ‘articulate wind’” not as inducements to improve his style or as coercion to accept the increasingly demanding artistic norms for the novel, but as vindications of his efforts to touch “some really deep cancer” in society (*LK* 1:267). By the *end* of the decade, however, he sounded less sure of the direction he had taken, less confident that Carlyle had been the best of all possible literary mentors. “One is sickened by the futilities of critics,” he writes in 1858. “Every one flatly contradicting the other, both when praising and when blaming! I never saw till now how worthless opinions of the press are. . . . I long for a guide; but where is there one?” (*LK* 2: 55).

Looking back on the nineteenth century’s middle decades, Frederic Harrison wrote in *Forum* in 1895:

In the early ‘fifties we were not so fastidious in the matter of style and composition as we have now become. Furious eloquence and somewhat melodramatic incongruities did not shock us so much, if we found them to come from a really glowing imagination and from genuine inspiration, albeit somewhat unpruned and ill-ordered. (570)

The decade to which Harrison refers is the very time in which Kingsley published five of his novels and wrote his major reviews (*The Water-Babies* appeared in 1863, and *Hereward the Wake* in 1866). While many readers, indeed, continued to admire Kingsley’s “glowing imagination,” his often pained reactions would suggest that critical norms in the fifties were not as flaccid as Harrison claims to remember. Because these norms were changing so rapidly and with such contention, however, they did have their own “furious eloquence” and “melodramatic incongruities.” Charles Kingsley became at once their champion and their victim, a beacon for those who demanded

direction and social purpose in literature, a lightning rod for the growing forces for literary artistry.

As Carol T. Christ has recently shown, by the *end* of the fifties critics had become increasingly tolerant of complexity in poetry: qualities that had been criticized as "obscure" in Robert Browning's *Men and Women* in 1855, for example, were celebrated as examples of "subtlety," "truth," and "authenticity" in *Dramatis Personae* in 1864 (Christ 145). Nonetheless, Kingsley's advocacy of "earnest" artistry in the fifties met with general approval, despite his suggestion that it did not. For him and for a majority of his contemporaries the principal subject for art *was*, as he put it, "the great Green-book which holds 'the open secret,' as Goethe calls it, seen by all, but read by, alas! how few" (*LK* 1: 174). And, as Christ observes, "contemporary criticism of the period assumed not only that literature should provide answers to important problems but that it does."

Goethe read the "book" of nature with an agenda that differed from Kingsley's, however, who elsewhere condemned him as "the ruin . . . of Germany." Goethe, Kingsley concluded, clouded the minds of his countrymen like a great fog and wrapped them up in a "high art fit" (*AL*, Prefatory Memoir, xxxix).² Such harsh reviews of literary artistry loudly set him at odds with the emerging modern critics, who found his rough-hewn aesthetics overly subjective and the presence of rhetoric in his novels obtrusive. Why was it that Kingsley, quite aware of the gathering critical storm, felt the need not only to continue writing the "typical" Victorian novel, but also to proselytize? In this essay I will examine his growing anxiety to influence, an anxiety expressed in terms of the aesthetic debate of the day, but rooted in the age's religious and political questions.

Kingsley thought that drama, like poetry, had a significant mission in the nineteenth century. His first major publication was a highly moralistic and polemical play, *The Saint's Tragedy* (1848). A few years later he wrote that the highest aim of theatre was to "exhibit the development of the human soul," and on this principle, he approved of the bowdlerization of Shakespeare: he feared that the Victorian era required such "clarification" of the bard, lest his moral teaching and his depiction of character development be overlooked (Rev. *Caxtons* 111). But by 1856 he had decided that contemporary drama had abdicated these teaching responsibilities, content instead to pack the houses by depicting characters having a "strange mixture of inward savagery with outward civilisation." Modern plays, he felt, would never fulfill their function of teaching: with no clear sense of moral justice in their plots, they had no "moral purpose" ("Plays" 15).

This suggests the central feature of his "aesthetic" goal. While admitting the value of fancy and imagination in human life and in the fine arts, he was one who never took the time fully to develop a poetics or a broader aesthetic

theory; in fact, he expressed in print his doubts regarding the possibility of a "true aesthetic science" ("Song Crop" 622–23). But, while he might denigrate the enterprise, he was as involved as anyone in shaping the critical norms of his day. Four of his seven novels were first published in serial form in *Fraser's*, *Macmillan's*, and *Good Words*, and he was a regular reviewer and contributor to these three journals, as well as to the *North British Review*, *Cornhill*, and others. So closely associated did he become with *Fraser's* that he was its de facto editor in 1867 when his brother-in-law, James Anthony Froude, was away on the lecture circuit.

One will easily discern in his novels, his several volumes of sermons, and his frequent reviews for these various journals, an aesthetics that is uniformly and polemically moral-utilitarian, convinced that rhetoric is absolutely *crucial* to artistry. In his opinion it was the lack of obvious purpose that had led to an emptiness in *all* the arts. When John William Parker assumed the editorship of *Fraser's* in 1848 Kingsley was already sounding the alarm. His advice to the new editor was direct: "I tell you fairly that *the* want which people feel in *Fraser's* is a want of earnest purpose and deep faith of any kind" (qtd. in Thorp 56). Wherever he looked in 1856 he saw decay: "Our stage, long since dead, does not revive; our poetry is dying; our music, like our architecture, only reproduces the past; our painting is only first rate when it handles landscapes and animals, and seems likely so to remain" ("Plays" 2).

He blamed critics no less than the artists. In his opinion they expressed outrage only when art in fact dared to "be in earnest, and to mean something, much more to connect itself with religion" ("Plays" 1–2),³ and he unfavorably contrasted this desire to separate art from personal conviction with the approach of the Middle Ages, in which the glory of art was the religious commitment apparent in the works.⁴

In 1855 *Chambers's Journal* urged Kingsley to cease writing fiction altogether and become, instead, the national lyrist, a Poet for the People, like Burns. In their opinion he had *all* the requisite gifts: originality, artful spontaneity, simplicity, suggestiveness, intensity of feeling, and a "Dantean distinctness" ("Charles Kingsley as a Lyric Poet" 378–79). He produced only a handful of pleasant but unimportant ballads, however, and eulogistic reviews in 1875 had to focus on what he might have done rather than on his poetic achievement.⁵

He offered several reasons for his own failure in poetry, but they are helpful chiefly as clues to his own confusion. In the first place, he wrote, following Coleridge's lead he had refused to use "poetic diction"; convinced that this decision had led him to write less artificially, he regretted that his lyrics consequently did not have "mythic grandeur enough." A more crippling limitation than this one, he continued, was his lack of the one essential poetic gift shared by writers as diverse as Alexander Smith and Shakespeare: "the power

of metaphor and analogue" (*LK* 1: 338; 2: 54–55). According to W.E. Aytoun (626), Kingsley's one great artistic gift was the "word-painting" in his poetry, but Kingsley did not agree. Ten years earlier he had admitted that he did not *know* "half enough to be a poet in the nineteenth century," but even then had protested that the true poet must not only "know things" but "acquire that objective power of *embodying* thoughts, without which poetry degenerates into the mere intellectual reflective, and thence into the metrical-prose didactic" (*LK* 1: 186).

This strong endorsement of the visual element suggests that Kingsley was well aware that a clumsy overemphasis on rhetoric ruined poetry. It also demonstrates that his literary theory was a development of his norms for the fine arts, norms which he elsewhere described as "mesothetic" — a golden mean between idealism and realism (with "realism" given a highly rhetorical reading) ("Henrietta Browne" 301).⁶ The talent most crucial for a Kingsleyan artist was the "discovery" of loveliness in "the universal symbolism and dignity of matter" (*Y* 287; ch. 15).⁷ While keeping in mind the ideal beauty he wishes to suggest, such an artist would render it realistic "by throwing in strong individual traits drawn from common life" (*LK* 2: 76).

In his frequent reviews of younger poets, Kingsley consistently worries that they are not taking sufficient care, cautioning Clough, for example, that

a high artistic finish is important for more reasons than for the mere pleasure which it gives to readers. There is something sacramental in perfect metre and rhythm. They are outward and visible signs (most seriously we speak as we say it) of an inward and spiritual grace, namely, of the self-possessed and victorious temper of one who has so far subdued nature as to be able to hear that universal sphere-music of hers. (Rev. "The Bothie" 107)

He asks not only for earnest feeling but also for polished artistry, and he finds it a strange paradox that his contemporaries had to "look for melody . . . rather in our prose than in our verse."⁸

Finally, however, his aesthetic demanded that poetry be not only well crafted and metaphorical, but also purposeful. John Martineau, one of Kingsley's students, remembered the advice his mentor had offered:

Considering that what the world needed was not verse, however good, so much as sound knowledge, sound reasoning, sound faith, and above all, as the fruit and evidence of the last, sound morality, [Kingsley] did not give free rein to his poetical faculty, but sought to make it his servant, not his master, to use it to illuminate and fix the eyes of men on the truths of science, of social relationship, of theology, of morality. (*LK* 1: 304)

While admitting his own inadequacy in the use of metaphor, Kingsley agreed with Matthew Arnold that few of his contemporaries used their poetic

skills to much avail. Tennyson alone survived, in solitary greatness, a connecting link between the poetry of the past and that of the future: "Like some stately hollyhock or dahlia of this month's gardens, he endures while all other flowers are dying; but all around is winter . . . especially prolific in fungi" ("Alex. Smith" 452). Ironically, while praising Matthew Arnold's delicate finish and great care in *The Strayed Reveller*, he asks "to what purpose [is being put] all the self-culture through which the author must have passed ere this volume could be written[?]" . . . When we have read all he has to say, what has he taught us?" ("Recent Poetry" 578). Thus, while disparaging poetry that was merely "metrical-prose didactic," Kingsley condemns an artistry that is "passive" or uncommitted to a recognizable creed. While admitting that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows*, on the other hand, was a bit careless in its artistry, he welcomes it in an age of "purposeless song-twittering" as a poem-with-a-purpose ("Song Crop" 619).

In his typically Victorian withering assaults on "Autotheism" ("Alex. Smith 458), "effeminate" Romantic poetry ("Thoughts" 574), and "self-indulgent moroseness and fastidiousness" (576), he questioned the validity of poetic inspiration that was not tamed, channeled, and clarified; he was among the first to mock the "Spasmodics" among the young poets.⁹ His caricatures, appearing not only in his reviews but also in his novels, went far in conveying the negative impression of affected poets that is still current today. Even Tennyson reacted defensively when he suspected (incorrectly, it appears) that he had served in *Two Years Ago* as the model for Elsley Vavasour, one of Kingsley's fictionalized effete poets.¹⁰

Vavasour wears lavender kid gloves and a Byronic turn-down collar; he has black curls, a moustache, and a "Raphael" haircut; he has "that dreary look so common among men of the poetic temperament," and a "bad complexion which at his age so often accompanies a sedentary life and a melancholic temper." He complains that he is a "Pegasus in harness" whose talents are withering on the vine. The reader knows what to think of this unKingsleyan dandy, but, in the view of the narrator, we might forgive even such foolishness as merely the rant spoken by all young men during their "course of Shelley." What we are to find less forgivable is Elsley's "lazy mooning over books" to the neglect of both work and amusement. An older man decides this fellow must be "in the scribbling line" because of his "nasty, effeminate un-English foppery."

Claude Mellot, the aesthetic theorist in *Yeast* (1851), reappears in *Two Years Ago* (1857), and calls Elsley "one of the *Sturm-und-Drang* party . . . the express locomotive school, scream-and-go-ahead . . . [who] thinks me, with my classicism, a benighted pagan" (TYA 156; ch. 19).¹¹ Fleeing family and social obligations, Vavasour seeks release in a mock-poetic immersion in nature, but instead reaches a nadir of alienation and gnostic isolation "in one

blank paralysis of his whole nature”:

Now is he safe at last; hidden from all living things — hidden, it may be, from God; for at least God is hidden from him. He has desired to be alone; and he is alone; the center of the universe, if universe there be. All created things, suns and planets, seem to revolve round him, and he a point of darkness, not of light. He seems to float self-poised in the center of the boundless nothing, upon an ell-broad slab of stone — and yet not even on that: for the very ground on which he stands he does not feel. He does not feel the mist which wets his cheek, the blood which throbs within his veins. He only is; and there is none besides. (*TYA* 214; ch. 21)

He observes a shipwreck and imagines “what a beautiful poem it will make, when we have thrown it into an artistic form, and bedizened it with conceits and analogies stolen from all heaven and earth by our own self-willed fancy.” The result, the narrator concludes, will no doubt be “an exquisite poem; but I cannot say that it is of much importance” (*TYA* 102; ch. 3).¹²

Vavasour and the others lacked the one great gift that would unify their meter and metaphor and give it purpose:

What our poets want is faith. . . . Without faith there can be no real art, for art is the outward expression of firm, coherent belief. And a poetry of doubt, even a sceptical poetry, in its true sense, can never possess clear and sound form, even organic form at all. (“Alexander” 460)

He was by no means oblivious to the implications of relativistic literary theories. The spasmodic poets he criticized dealt “more and more with conceits, and less and less with *true* metaphors” simply because they doubted that man, God, and nature could communicate any longer (“Alexander” 462–63). It is no surprise that he advised aspiring poets to

think it no fall, but rather a noble rise, to shun the barren glacier ranges of pure art, for the fertile gardens of practical and popular song, and write for the many, and with the many, in words such as they can understand, remembering that that which is simplest is always deepest. (“Burns” 183)

This is the lesson that Alton Locke, Kingsley’s worker-poet, gradually learns. At first, however, he mitigates his prophetic message and courts critical acclaim, and artistic success enslaves him: by having less to say he becomes in fact the “Pegasus in harness” (*TYA* 5; ch. 1) that Elsley Vavasour imagines himself to be. In Kingsley’s religious imagery, he becomes something more seriously reprehensible: an apostate artist of “insincere impiety” (“Alex. Smith” 459).

Significant of Kingsley’s prosaic bent, this conversion of the worker-poet is contained within a novel rather than an autobiographical poem like *Aurora Leigh*. Like Dickens and many of his contemporaries, Kingsley felt that the

novelist now had to assume the role that more compellingly fell to the dramatist, and more traditionally to the poet. In 1850, he offered the opinion that the novel, "however charlatans may degrade it, and the lazy world love to have it degraded, is in idea, next to the drama, the highest organ of moral teaching, and in practice just now a far more powerful one." After such a strong affirmation of didacticism, it is somewhat surprising to read his rejection of Grundyism, vehement and arguably quite misogynistic:

She — the "Gamp" of the West end — old gnat-straining, camel-swallowing, fetish-worshipping, prophet-murdering haridan of starch and buckram respectability, descended by the father's side from the Scribes, the Pharisees, and Balaam the son of Bosor, and by the mother's from Mrs. Nickleby and Madam Blaise! Absolutely we will not let her speak, especially now that in her dotage she is getting venomous as well as twaddling, and strengthens her Billingsgate by a strong spice of lying and slandering. (Rev. *Caxtons* 98)

As we shall see, however, the "responsible" novelist would not need such external prompts.

Kingsley was greatly disturbed that many novelists were frittering away the potential uses of their "new" medium. As in the case of contemporary paintings, poems, and plays, a great many novels were being produced that had little "meaning" whatsoever ("Little Books" 26). He therefore recommended that in writing a novel "each man's speech shall show more of his character," and "the general tone shall be such as never to make the reader forget the main purpose of the book" (*LK* 2: 39–40). As an Anglican priest, Kingsley considered it crucially important that the divinely-ordered world lying beneath the profusion of incidents become evident,¹³ and, to this effect, he advised that the fictional world never become so convincing that the reader forget the presence of the author.

This advice ran strongly against the gathering aesthetic tone of the day, but it was at least boldly offered: in defense of authorial intrusions, he complained that

people are too stupid and in too great a hurry, to interpret the most puzzling facts for themselves, and the author must now and then act as showman, and do it for them. Whether it's according to "Art" or not, I don't care a fig. What's "Art"? I never saw a little beast flying about with "Art" labelled on its back. Art ought to mean the art of pleasing and instructing, and, believe me, these passages in which the author speaks in his own person do so. (*LK* 2: 40)

He wrote appreciatively of those like Bulwer-Lytton who combined serious purpose with great technical skill, calling *The Caxtons* and *Ernest Maltravers* "the two best novels in the English language" (Rev. *Caxtons* 98),¹⁴ but he feared that such marriages of artistry and serious purpose were becoming

rare. In their place were sentimental pulp or, at the other extreme, works of art detached from a clear moral point of view.

As if to underscore his concern, he wrote a Preface to a new edition of Henry Brooke's *The Fool of Quality* (originally published in 1766–70), implicitly equating his own aesthetic guidelines with those of the eighteenth century and ridiculing those of a growing number of his contemporaries. What Kingsley describes as the “very realistic tone of thought” (Preface xlv) in *The Fool of Quality* is a model of his own mesothetic idealism. Extending to five volumes, Brooke's novel recounts the life of Harry Clinton, abandoned as a child but eventually recognized as heir to the Earl of Moreland. What is of interest to Brooke (and to Kingsley) is the depiction of Clinton's character (which is saint-like) and the presentation of an exemplary Christian life without the “distraction” of high artistry.

Kingsley admitted that his “hopeless inability to judge of the goodness or badness” of anything he himself wrote made him “more and more modest about [his] own ‘aesthesis’” (*LK* 2: 43) — though that is not self-evident. Against the new criticism, he praised Brooke's method: “whether or not there be dramatic unity in his plot,” it aims at a “moral process” of instruction, with the consequence that one learns more from this book that is “pure, sacred, and eternal” than from any other published since Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (Preface xlvii–xlviii). Brooke demonstrates a “genial humanity” and a “grand ethics” that redeem his novel from the “sentimentalism” and “superstition” of so many more popular novels. Critics who emphasized artistry, he asserted, would condemn Brooke's extravagant and clumsy plot, his obtrusive sermonizing, his quixotic morality, and his general lack of artistry — in fact, all the faults that various reviewers found in Kingsley's own novels. Such critics, Kingsley predicted, would list these faults to explain the falling off in popularity of Brooke's didactic novel over the last few decades, but such a dismissal would in fact be an indictment of the nineteenth century — “an age which seems determined that art shall confine itself more and more exclusively to the trivial, the temporary, and the vulgar” (Preface xlv).

It is obvious, therefore, that what Kingsley saw as essential to *poetry* — convincing metaphor and avoidance of outright didacticism — never dominated his criticism of fiction. Whether his subject was the relationship between men and women, the Crimean war, sanitation reform, Chartism, the century's need for faith, or any of a raft of other issues, he was among the many who saw the novel as an elaborated tract or a more imaginative journal article. He made this explicit in his transformation of *Cheap Clothes and Nasty* into *Alton Locke*, telling his friend John Ludlow that the facts of the earlier pamphlet were the “golden egg” contained within the novel (Martin 112). As late as 1863 he is “apologizing” to his religious mentor, Frederick Denison Maurice, for having written an entertaining novel, *The Water-Babies*: “if I have

wrapped up my parable in seeming Tom-fooleries, it is because so only could I get the pill swallowed by a generation who are not believing with anything like their whole heart, in the Living God" (*LK* 2: 137–38).

In his view even the most serious attempt at realism, increasingly expected by critics, required a selection of detail or it would never meet Aristotle's norms for credibility: "the idea of self-evolution in a story, beautiful as it is, is just one of those logical systems which is too narrow for the transcendental variety of life and fact" (*LK* 2: 39).¹⁵ What Kingsley may mean by this "transcendental variety of life and fact" is worthy of investigation, since it is at the heart of the increasingly anxious position he and like-minded Victorians sought to maintain against a less-religiously-minded aesthetic movement.

As he told the critic George Brimley, it was the author's business not to be obtrusive but "to speak, if he can, the thoughts of many hearts, to put into words for his readers what they would have said for themselves if they could."¹⁶ Whether handled with grace or awkwardly, however, this "editorializing" in representation had to be done: "the Greeks found it necessary, so do we." Writing novels was *always* "a farce and a sham," in any case, since no reader would believe a straightforward account of the simple life within a circle of five miles round his own house (*LK* 2: 44). Fact is stranger than fiction, in Kingsley's experience; what is more, "undirected" realism would never change society.

Changing society, though, was very much on Kingsley's mind, and on the minds of the other "Condition of England" novelists, poets, and painters, and education was to play a large role in "channeling" one's perception of reality. As Chris Baldick has shown in *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848–1932*, among the structural changes proposed by these writers, beyond the political and economic reforms, was the regularized study of English literature in higher education — specifically as a "civilizing" subject. Baldick lists three factors as significant in this development:

first, the specific needs of the British empire expressed in the regulations for admission to the India Civil Service; second, the various movements for adult education including Mechanics Institutes, Working Men's Colleges, and extension lecturing; third, within this general movement, the specific provisions made for women's education. (61)

Kingsley was significantly involved in the second and third of these movements. "For Charles Kingsley, literature offered — particularly to women — a training in personal sympathy with authors and fictional characters" (214). Women so "trained" could then take the lead in "softening and humanizing the middle classes" (69), who might then look with more generosity upon the lower classes.

But Catherine Gallagher and Rosemarie Bodenheimer have shown that

Kingsley's own ambivalence towards these lower classes, his concern to support their "legitimate" aspirations while reconciling them to a benevolent God, not only clouded the "cause" he championed in his fiction, but also forced him, against his will and perhaps against his knowledge, to write a polysemous narrative. In several senses his fiction inadvertently worked against his stated dismissal of aesthetic complexity.

This is especially evident in *Alton Locke*, subtitled *Tailor and Poet*. Bodenheimer sees it as a reimagining of the British aristocracy in pastoral terms. Alton is tamed by the narrative, and his subsequent leadership is possible "only because he has made the greatest transcendence of them all: beyond both class and sex"; Alton "eschews social power even as he embodies the spirit of collectivity" (149).

Bodenheimer's description of this "collectivity" builds on Catherine Gallagher's brilliant investigation of the novel, surely the most penetrating I have read. In Gallagher's view, as Alton narrates his remembrance of his participation in a riot, he substitutes the unruly masses for himself, and "when he returns to the first person, he does so explicitly as a representative of that mass. . . . One Alton becomes thousands, thousands who are themselves 'insane', 'torn apart by passions'" (99). In fact, as the story progresses, Alton's personality becomes less and less substantial, more oceanic in its comprehensive nature.

The reasons Gallagher proposes for this dissolution of personality are complex. As she indicates, the novel was written in response to *Sartor Resartus* which, as a fictional autobiography of a writer, is a Romantic form that "presupposes the reconcilability of material circumstances and spiritual life" (90). But Kingsley wished to expose the inequities of the sweatshops of the London clothing industry — a world far removed from the Nature with which a Romantic autobiographer comes to identify. Kingsley's moral purpose in this novel — the transformation of the given world — is therefore at odds with its aesthetic form.

Furthermore, Gallagher argues that in *Alton Locke* Kingsley wishes not only to reform society, but also to reform critical expectations for such novels. Against the Romantic tradition he uses this novel to demonstrate "that some people are less free than others; that some circumstances prevent the birth of the spirit; and that, even when a poet's spirit does emerge, its existence is not an end in itself" (91). Alton, as a representative not only of the masses but of self-conscious poets as well, must become a "civilizing" influence in much the same way that educated women did, according to Baldick's analysis. In both situations Kingsley's resolution of clearly uncomfortable antinomies remains unconvincing and tenuous, but energetic.

They also lead to the passages in his writing that most appeal to twentieth-century readers. Alton's ultimate resolution, for example, seemingly cannot

be realized on this earth: Kingsley resorts to an interesting dream sequence. As Bodenheimer has seen, as

a narrative act, it is Kingsley's grandest gesture of escape from the circumstances of Alton's social dilemmas and from the consequentiality demanded by the novel form itself. But it reproduces both the flight from circumstance and the failure of that flight: Alton's dream invents a new human hero forged outside of human history in evolution and biblical myth. (149)

While we find this intriguing, Kingsley himself, had he noticed the same practical irresolution, would have been disappointed at its lack of clarity, at its "real" *inconsequentiality*.

Gallagher is even more pointed in her analysis of the religious and aesthetic questions that Kingsley could not resolve and that shaped his novel:

Kingsley had a naive faith in the ability of fictions to present reality (however romantically conceived) in a straightforward manner. Once the project was begun, however, the structure of reality itself (in this case, the body of industrial social criticism) proved to be contradictory, and the writer was forced to reconsider the very bases of his storytelling. How is character formed? What are the causes of people's actions? Are actions free? Can they be explained? The definitely early-Victorian quality of this novel arises from both its failure to answer these questions and its inability to suppress them. (109)

Published in 1849, *Alton Locke* seemed simple and straightforward enough: a critique, echoed in *Two Years Ago* (1857), of those poets in Victorian society who lived to write poetry: who would *not* put down their Byron and pick up their supposedly-dutiful Goethe. The Victorian muse Kingsley invoked was a God who inspired poets to reform society, not prettify it. As Gallagher, Bodenheimer, and several other twentieth-century critics have discovered, however, Kingsley's typically Victorian multivalence — his prior unresolved questions of causality, of free will and determination — ultimately preempted the force of his aesthetic critique. Uncertain how to reconcile his Christian Socialism with his growing appreciation of a Darwinian worldview, he built his aesthetic castle not in the air, but on sand.

THE RESULT OF THIS internal uncertainty was the collapse of his position of authority as a shaper of Victorian artistic norms. Tom Taylor's 1855 article for the *National Review* is a classic example of that passing school of criticism tailor-made for Kingsley's novels, in which the writing of fiction was encouraged as homiletic.¹⁷ Taylor builds his argument on his assumption that "no school of writing can be permanent unless it have an aim beyond amusing" (128); this assumption was shared by most of Taylor's contemporaries.

In his opinion, this obvious aim made Kingsley a greater novelist than Scott, whose expository techniques advanced the *art* of fiction, but whose lack of serious purpose resulted in an “effete” body of literature. In contrast, Kingsley, like Dickens and Thackeray, recognized his duty as a novelist: even more consistently than the other two, he was “true to his mission — in which the novel-writer’s desk is used as a second pulpit, to attract a larger and more awakened audience” (153). Taylor’s comprehensive review was unusual in its further claim that Kingsley avoided turning his novels into tracts (like the Low Church) or polemics (like the Oxford school), and successfully addressed a wider audience. A perusal of Robert Lee Wolff’s *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* reveals that Kingsley’s novels actually *were* far less narrowly sectarian than the majority of now-forgotten religious novels.

Carlyle had set the standard for this school of criticism in his lecture on the Hero as Man of Letters, emotionally praising his three exemplars (Johnson, Rousseau, and Burns) for their earnest dedication to the ideas expressed in their artistry (180, 185, 192). The moral responsibility of a “Carlylean” critic like Kingsley, therefore, had less to do with the objective dissection of an author’s artistry than with an estimation of the new truth he revealed. “Not the writing merely, but what a man writes, makes him an object of interest to me,” Kingsley confessed (*LK* 2: 221), and in his reviews he went further, judging the greatness of a novelist by his or her success in influencing readers to be moral. This belief explains his fondness for Bunyan, Bulwer-Lytton, and Henry Brooke, writers whose didactic intentions were clear.

The Carlylean biographical aesthetic that held sway in many religious journals, however, offered few objective norms for judging the novels themselves: regardless of *how* something was expressed, the essential question one had to consider was the impact of the man himself.¹⁸ Sir Arthur Helps, for example, wrote that Kingsley was “the best son, the best father, the best husband, the best parish priest” he ever knew, and from this he could conclude further that Kingsley’s writings displayed “genius” (376).¹⁹ Even the *Saturday Review*, which had little patience with novelists who sought to do more than amuse, compared him, almost affectionately, to “a Spaniard, who is ready to fight for the Immaculate Conception, and not like a schoolman, to whom the subtlety decided by the doctrine was a real difficulty” (Rev. *Miscellanies* 583).²⁰

The same norms could work against a novelist, of course. A Roman Catholic critic like Mary Mallock, less willing to accept Kingsleyan biases, admitted it was easy for many to identify with Kingsley since he was “archetypal of the average” (18) — but she feared he was also chronically immature.²¹ A still more critical review in *The Rambler* of 1860 likewise turned its readers’ attention away from the works themselves and toward the

novelist — with equally damning effect. Florence Bastard criticizes Kingsley for replacing abstract questions, dogma, and authority, with personal influence, broad assertion, and popular prejudice, but she goes on to offer the backhanded compliment that his late insecurity proved he at last recognized the limitations of these emotional appeals.²² Like most contemporary critics with a Carlylean interest in purposeful writing, Bastard seems to have had no theoretical difficulty with Kingsley's heavily polemical use of fiction — only with his conclusions and, therefore, with him. We are to judge the artistry by the biography.

It was in the latter half of the fifties, however, that critical opinion became sharply divided on the question of Kingsley's ultimate literary merit. He had always been controversial, of course, but where at first his *ideas* had been a direct focus of controversy, critics now attacked his "purposes" as lacking artistic restraint. By the artistic standards that gradually dominated the major literary journals, Kingsley's fiction and the criticism that supported it were notable principally for their lack of discipline. Ironically, the strongest letters of personal support that Kingsley's wife remembers in her biography are from the late fifties, after "some particularly bitter newspaper attacks" in which her husband's "noble and much-traduced work in God's service" was subjected to "foolish calumny" (*LK* 2: 30–31). Fanny is referring to the harsh review in the *London Times* of December 29, 1857, criticizing her husband's obtrusive moralizing. A new sobriety gradually dominated the reviews, as Richard Stang has demonstrated. By 1864, Justin McCarthy in *Westminster Review* and others were demanding "canonical laws and ecclesiastical courts of literature" that would establish more objective artistic norms (26). This newer emphasis, while usually admitting the need for uplifting matter, increasingly demanded a polished manner.

It is ironic, therefore, that Kingsley published his highly-rhetorical Preface to *The Fool of Quality* in 1859, the same year that Balzac's *La Recherche de l'absolu* and *Eugénie Grandet* were translated into English, and one year before the translation of *Père Goriot*. No doubt aware of this implied challenge from across the channel, Kingsley declared in the Preface that he much preferred the Gospels to Balzac's starkly realistic novels, and for a very "mesothetic" reason: the Frenchman simply showed what already existed, while Scripture pointed to what should or might be (xlv).

As *all* seemed to agree, however, Balzac "showed what already existed" remarkably well, and that was his challenge — an artistic challenge he posed not only to polemical novelists like Kingsley, but to even the most aesthetically-minded of British critics. As Walter Kendrick has shown, in the forties and increasingly in the fifties, Balzac was pressuring British criticism "toward the assertion, which would be widely made later in the century, that his art had positive moral worth irrespective of what it portrayed" (12).²³ As we have

seen, this is exactly the position Kingsley rejected: a few years earlier he had warned that "no man has a right to bring his hero through such a state [of blasphemous doubting of God's providence] without showing how he came out of the slough, as carefully as how he came into it, especially when the said hero is set forth as a marvellously clever person" ("Alex. Smith" 458).

In retrospect, therefore, W.R. Greg's harsh critique of *Alton Locke* in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1851 was a startling premonition of things to come. Greg begins his analysis by noting that *Alton Locke*, like many "inferior" novels, has been written "with the purpose of illustrating an opinion or establishing a doctrine." But he considers this an "illegitimate" use of fiction:

Fiction may be rightfully employed to impress upon the public mind an acknowledged truth, or to revise and recall a forgotten one, — never to prove a disputed one. Its appropriate aims are the delineation of life, the exhibition and analysis of character, the portraiture of passion, the description of nature. Polemics, whether religious, political, or metaphysical, lie wholly beyond its province. (30–31)

In direct response to Greg's essay, Walter Bagehot in the same year relegates mere entertainment to the nursery, hospital, and mad-house, and heatedly contends that art must not avoid its social responsibilities in a search for the sublime and the beautiful. He suggests, in fact, that the nineteenth-century novelist had an *obligation* to polemicize his or her writing since fiction, almost uniquely, offered a safe arena to imagine solutions to complex social problems.

But by 1859, upon the publication of *Adam Bede*, Bagehot had become one of George Eliot's strongest supporters and had turned a far more critical eye on Kingsley. Ironically, it was not so much that Bagehot deserted Kingsley's principles as that he found them more "artistically" realized in Eliot. He most praised her for the delineation and examination of character, the quality Kingsley hoped novels might salvage from the irresponsible Victorian stage. Eliot herself in mid-century had hoisted Kingsley on his own petard, claiming that he had lost faith in his "clearer" vision and had fallen back on rhetorical browbeating (289).²⁴ So strong was Eliot's reasoning that Bagehot apparently *encouraged* Greg's second and even stronger 1860 attack on Kingsley's "improvisational" style of writing. The tide had definitely turned.

The question one sardonic reviewer asked in 1855 was implied by many like-minded critics: "Would not a few calmly argued treatises which men might read and ponder be of more real weight than an indefinite number of drawing room fictions?"²⁵ Not only might such prosaic treatises be more effectively instructive and move more readers to meaningful activity, but they would relieve novels of an unfair burden. *Artistic* standards might then govern the writing of fiction, and demonstrate that good novels could endure

beyond any social problems they immediately addressed.²⁶

This shift in emphasis from the moral obligations of writers to the demands of artistic integrity gradually reshaped the expectations by which Kingsley was judged. In his 1855 review for *Blackwood's*, W.E. Aytoun summarizes the "new" criticisms (one might even say New Criticism) made by many others. For him, the novels were unlike any others in English. They had excited an extraordinary amount of attention and were read by everyone — and this in spite of the fact that his faults were numerous and glaring: he exaggerated wildly, ignored conventions of probability, drew characters either lacking in originality or *bizarrely* original; he filled his works with false sentiment, violations of nature and propriety, views that were unsound or unproven, prejudices, paradoxes, and argumentation which led beyond the author's stated intent. Nevertheless, he remained utterly fascinating. He had a great command of language, a style that was (when not affected) "singularly pure, nervous [that is, energetic], and masculine" (626). In his depiction of scenery he was virtually without equal (once again, his "word-painting" meets with approval). Each of these judgments reappears in major reviews throughout the nineteenth century, and they quickly became "the line" on Kingsley's literary performance. His effect on readers and on their society, the criteria whereby he wished to be judged, rarely entered into the discussion any longer.

Some form of didacticism remained an aim for many of the best novelists of the period, but the *manner* of instruction became increasingly controversial.²⁷ Dickens and Thackeray, for example, saw themselves in a teaching role, but struggled to find a careful "mix" of realism, fancy, internal consistency, and moral uplift.²⁸ George Meredith wrote to a critic in 1887:

I think that all right use of life, and the one secret of life, is to pave ways for the firmer footing of those who succeed us; as to my works, I know them faulty, think them of worth only when they point and aid to that end. Close knowledge of our fellows, discernment of the laws of existence, these lead to great civilization. I have supposed that the novel, exposing and illustrating the natural history of man, may help us to such sustaining roadside gifts. But I have never started on a novel to pursue the theory it developed. The dominant idea in my mind took up the characters and the story midway. (Meredith 2: 398)

He elsewhere ridiculed Kingsley's unsophisticated manipulation of his characters — taking special exception to *Two Years Ago's* Elsie Vavasour:

He is a chip of purpose, born two years ago to play the fool with a sweet little woman, blight her and everybody dependent on him, stumble up mountains, fire a frantic pistol at his supposed rival, drink laudanum and die, and point a spasmodic moral. No wonder Mr. Kingsley is constantly pummeling him. Compassion for this puny Frankenstein is out of the question. ("Belles Lettres" 610)²⁹

And, while late in the century many critics still required serious fiction to

"defend" morality,³⁰ in the eighties most remembered Kingsley as the *locus classicus* of the "extreme" defense they would now reject. *The Spectator* admitted that a moral purpose, though not the chief aim of fiction, *need* not be fatal to art — but became so in cases like Kingsley's, where complexities in the moral life and ambiguities in appeals to conscience were seldom in evidence ("Moral Purpose").³¹

As early as 1858 John Skelton had written that "this critical mania of our day and generation must reach a climax ere long" (739). Kingsley did not trust in the approval of any of the critics ("for one expects nothing of them") and instead decided to impress the average reader. This decision, as we have seen, had its consequences, and Kingsley was aware of many of them. He wrote in 1865 that he was "a very Esau now with the Press," going his own way, and "joining no literary clique, without which one must submit to hatred and abuse. . . . [And] as for 'living in the literary world', it is just what I don't and won't" (*LK* 2: 221). There had been a sea change in the literary climate by 1865; Kingsley's aesthetics had become passé. Left behind were the rhetorical theorists: Bulwer-Lytton, for whom art without a political end was not art; the utilitarian critics, for whom art without a social or moral purpose was not art; and Charles Kingsley and other Christian critics, for whom art without a call to conversion was not art.

In 1849 Kingsley had claimed that he would write neither to make money (although that was, in fact, something of a concern), nor simply to write well, but to call the attention of his readers to social and religious problems ("North Devon"). Meanwhile, sounding a great deal like Carlyle, he privately complained: "Your hackwriter of no creed, your bigot Polyphemus, whose one eye just helps him to see to eat men, they do not understand this; their pens run on joyful and light of heart" (*LK* 1: 181). This, of course, was to beg the question.

The new critics, in turn, complained that Kingsley, with the "least pretension to art" produced, not novels, but "writings to and against the age" ("Genius" 484).³² His "too-obvious" didacticism, his inadequate characterization, his clumsy exposition — all the criticisms of the craftsmanship of tendentious novelists — generally condemned his works for later generations. As his friend and former pupil, John Martineau, defiantly wrote in 1875, however:

not [the novels'] least merit is that in part they will *not* live, except as the seed lives in the corn which grows, or water in the plant which it has revived. For their power often lay mainly in the direction of their aim at the special need of the hour, the memory of which has passed, or will pass, away. (*LK* 1: 305)³³

It was at least partially due to Kingsley's special powers of communication

that some of those “special needs of the hour” did, in fact, pass away. He would have found this sufficient vindication of his vigorous rhetoric and his questionable artistry.

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NOTES

1. *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of His Life*; cited in text as *LK*.
2. *Alton Locke*, Chester edition, 1899; cited in text as *AL*.
3. *Christian Remembrancer* advanced a similar argument in its comparison of Alexis Rio with Reynolds and Ruskin, but reached a happier conclusion. In the last twenty-five years, the journal noted, many had realized there was a “morality of art, independent of fashion or whim or opinion.” Earlier English art had been “content to minister to the refined gratification of the senses, but had well-nigh forgotten its old mission of quickening faith and inspiring devotion, and stirring the emotions and sympathies of the soul” (Rev. of Rio 271, 275).
4. He advanced this argument while noting that, in so doing, he risked his credentials as an anti-Papist (Rev. of *Poetry of Sacred* 286).
5. See Escott and King.
6. He had advised that “he who devotes himself to the works of a single school, fancying, because they seem to him to be the highest form, that they contain also the whole sphere of art, is certain to end as a mannerist of some cramped and ugly sort” (“Song Crop” 622).
7. *Yeast*, Bideford edition, 1899; cited in text as *Y*.
8. He considered Newman the prime example of melodious prose; see “Readables and Unreadables.”
9. He may have been responsible for this application of the term. In any event, he, Matthew Arnold, and W.E. Aytoun formed something of a triadic critical chorus in their reviews of self-posturing poetasters. See Weinstein, esp. 99–108.
10. The rift soon healed, but Chitty finds grounds for Tennyson’s suspicions (158); Martin does not (203). Kingsley’s 1855 review of *Maud* for *Fraser’s* comes as close as it can to describing the poem as “spasmodic” without using the word, and Kingsley explained privately that he had held back because he so respected Tennyson as a man and personal friend (Thorp 94–95).
11. *Two Years Ago* is cited in text as *TYA*. Kingsley elsewhere describes *himself* as a “strong classicist” (*LK* 2: 76).
12. Tennyson similarly describes the false poet in “Palace of Art” as one who “did love beauty only,” and who consequently finds himself alone, “howling in outer darkness.”
13. This obligation became even more pressing when one’s friends demeaned the enterprise. Charles Mansfield, a friend described by one biographer as Kingsley’s Hallam, called novels “decorated lies,” and urged him to give them up; see Robert Bernard Martin, 39, 100. F.D. Maurice, whose advice shaped so much of Kingsley’s thought, always admired the expository skill of Walter Scott but criticized him for wasting his potential as a powerful agent of social transformation. In 1865, fearful, perhaps, that *Westward Ho!* and *Hereward the Wake* had been

closer to adventure stories than his rhetorical early novels, Kingsley assured Maurice: "I am taking a regular course of metaphysic, and so forth, as a tonic after the long debauchery of fiction-writing. . . . Have patience with me" (*LK* 2: 216).

14. Ironically, Bulwer-Lytton considered *The Caxtons* one of his least artistic novels, aimed principally at pleasing readers with its simple emotions (Lytton 2: 105).
15. He had to be aware that Charles Dickens's critics objected that his representation of life often lacked verisimilitude, and that this threatened to turn his novels into less effective romances. On this criticism, see Ford (132). Dickens objected that those who accused him of caricature were most needful of artists to show them the realities their own eyes ignored (120).
16. Like Kingsley, Trollope and Thackeray explicitly recognized that they guided their reader's response to the incidents of their stories, but they never defended their rhetorical control as directly as did Kingsley (Stang 98–99).
17. R.A. Fyfe noted favorably that serious writers and publishers no longer contented themselves with an interesting story; instead, a religious element became centrally important. Five years later W.T. Eustis was pleased to see the continuation of this trend.
- 18.

The world's manner of dealing with [the Hero as Man of Letters] is the most significant feature of the world's general position. . . . It deeply concerns the whole society, whether it will set its *light* on high places, to walk thereby; or trample it under foot. . . . [That is why] I call this anomaly of a disorganic Literary Class the heart of all other anomalies, at once product and parent; some good arrangement for that would be as the *punctum saliens* of a new vitality and just arrangement for all. (155, 168)

19. Reviewers for *Academy* and for *The Congregationalist* claimed that it was Kingsley's example as a Christian individual rather than any permanent quality in his writings that revealed his importance for the age (see F.L. and "The Late Canon").
20. *Every Saturday's* gently ironic review of *Prose Idylls* typifies the widespread recognition of Kingsley's essential "wholesomeness." The writer remarks that

Mr. Kingsley seems to be always on the point of jumping up to confute that undevout astronomer [Alfonso of Castile] with some such assertion as this: "When you say you could have got the world better made if you had been there, you talk nonsense; for I was there myself, and you must give me leave to tell you it was very well made indeed." (130)

21. Appearing well into the "aesthetic era," such a biographical emphasis seems anachronistic — a demonstration of the endurance, as well as limitations, of subjective criticism.
- 22.

[Mr. Kingsley] knows that the writer who embodies the sanguine hopes of youth and genius must later choose between diminished self-confidence which includes diminished influence, and dreamy cant, adopted to hide lost illusions; and he has honestly chosen the former alternative [in his later writings], manfully casting away mystic utterances in which he no longer believes, and which, like every thing merely human, harden into forms of

words in which those who use them have no more faith, though they cast still "the spell of the Unknown" over the young and the hopeful. (77)

Although she finds in the Kingsley of 1860 a less influential, because less fanatic, advocate of liberal Protestant causes, his reception by students as a Professor of Modern History at Cambridge suggests that he remained quite popular with the young even while tempering his prose.

23. As Balzac's influence spread, "it was the approved model of the artist which changed — from that of the Trollopian shoemaker, who merged without a tremor into the society he portrayed, to that of the Balzacian scientist-historian, who stood apart from society and practiced an art with its own set of rules and standards" (Kendrick 19). The artist became "responsible only to his art and not to the world's disorder" (Kendrick 24).

24.

If he would confine himself to his true sphere, he might be a teacher in the sense in which every great artist is a teacher — namely, by giving us his higher sensibility as a medium, a delicate acoustic or optical instrument, bringing home to our coarser senses what would otherwise be unperceived by us. (291)

25. This anonymous reviewer for *Hogg's Instructor (Titan)*, for example, amusingly suggested that citations in the future would reflect the formal confusion:

No longer will one groan over such references as these: —Thom. Aq. Summ. Theol. (lib. x., cap. xi., sec. xii); Duns. Scot. de Sent. Lombard (prop. iii., sec. iv.); Grot. de Jure Belli et Pacis (vol. i., lib. ii., cap. iii.). We shall be charmed by such authorities as these: — "The Christian Religion and the Rights of Man" (see exhort. at bedside of Alt. Locke by Elean. Lune, stand. nov., vol. xi. Kings.); "The Fundamental Distinction between Religion and Philosophy" (see speech declar. of Ed. Clifford to Angel. Goldfinch. Bent. ser., vol. xix.). (131)

26. See, for example, "Of Novels, Historical and Didactic." The most pointed dismissal of the polemical novel is G.H. Lewes's review of Danby North's *The Mildmayes*:

Every monomaniac who wishes to force his one idea upon his neighbours now writes a tale. . . . [This] becomes intolerable when, expecting to be amused with a lively picture of social foibles and absurdities, you find yourself suddenly plunged head foremost into a polemical controversy, or the discussion of some knotty point in church doctrine and discipline. . . . [Such a] perverse desecration of light literature [was a] literary swindle. (18–19)

27. One anonymous reviewer for the *North British Review* offered a devastating synopsis of a typically "purposeful" plot, indicting the "interminable and unmitigated twaddle." He warned that, if this were to continue, then:

society, when it wants amusement, will cease to read romance, and will turn to Mr. Spurgeon's theology [the Baptist preacher] or Mr. Tupper's philosophy [the author of *Proverbial Philosophy*, which became synonymous with

contemptible commonplace]. The novel will become forbidden ground to the idle and the frivolous, — to any, in short, except serious readers. (210)

28. But critics did not uniformly appreciate their compromise. See Ford on Dickens, and Flamm on Thackeray.
29. Poetry might benefit a sermon, one late reviewer noted, but the reverse was seldom true (Howse 243). See also *Christian Remembrancer* (1857), *Tait's* (1855), and review of *Westward Ho!*
30. Leslie Stephen's eloquent article, "Art and Morality," for example (written the year of Kingsley's death), rejected the complete separation of literature from moral teaching. For a detailed treatment of these views see Annan 300–38, and see, also, Graham.
31. G.H. Lewes's review of *Ruth* and *Villette* anticipated much of this argument. Lewes argued that in "moral" fiction the purpose must not overpower the vehicle, and the story must be able to sustain the weight of intention. Feeling and fancy, more than obvious sermonizing, must guide the author's imagination.
32. In his later review Greg, also, noted Kingsley's "singular absence of the artistic spirit" (21).
33. Anthony Trollope's words might as easily have been spoken by Kingsley: "In his own age [the novelist] can have great effect for good or evil; but we know as yet of [none] who has influenced after ages" (181).

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